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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

14 December 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR (Draft for Board Consideration)

SUBJECT: The Soviet Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean

Nature of the Presence

1. The Soviet Navy first became active in the Indian Ocean during the International Geophysical Year, 1957-58, with the dispatch of an oceanographic research ship for intelligence gathering. From then until 1965-66, activity was maintained by the deployment of two to three ships per year on extended oceanographic cruises. The first appearance of a combatant came in early 1965 when the USSR sent a destroyer to join the Ethiopian Navy Day celebrations at Massawa. This was done again in 1966 and 1967. In mid-summer 1967, the Soviets dispatched 15 ships into the Indian Ocean in support of space operations. Among them were space event support ships, tankers, and auxiliaries.

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2. But the year 1968 marked the real beginnings of increased Soviet naval deployments to the Indian Ocean. In March of that year, three combatants, supported by two tankers, cruised for four months, making port calls in eight countries. Since then, surface ships and submarines from both the Pacific Fleet and the western Fleets have deployed to the Indian Ocean. In some cases western Fleet combatants have been transferred to Pacific Fleet control after lengthy Indian Ocean cruises. Combatants deployment since 1968 has included a guided missile cruiser, a guided missile destroyer, a tank landing ship, and one or two submarines. These ships have generally remained in the ocean for anywhere from three to six months with approximately three months elapsing between deployments. In addition, the Soviets usually keep at least one destroyer in the Indian Ocean between and during major deployments. At present, the Soviets have three surface combatants and a submarine there.

3. Until now, the Soviets appear to have relied on accompanying auxiliaries to provide maintenance by way of necessary fuel and dry and refrigerated stores. Typical support for deployed combatants consists of three auxiliaries and two tankers. As is common Soviet practice in other distant

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areas, naval units operating in the Indian Ocean use a number of anchorages outside territorial waters as waiting positions, refueling points, and areas for general support. We have identified five such areas, all in the western Indian Ocean. The Soviets have, meanwhile, made efforts to obtain ashore support facilities of the kind now available to them in the UAR. So far, the search has not been successful.

4. Since March of 1968, about half of the Soviet naval units in the Indian Ocean have been oceanographic and space-related ships. (Although naval-subordinated, these ships are unarmed.) During the past two years there usually have been at least one and sometimes as many as five oceanographic ships operating there. The number of space-support ships deployed has varied according to the tempo of the Soviet space program. With the launching of Zond 7 in August 1969 there was a high of nine to the Indian Ocean; in mid-1970 there was only one.

5. The largest deployment of combatants occurred in April 1970 in connection with the Soviet world-wide naval exercise "Okean", when six surface combatants and two submarines were in the Indian Ocean. The presence of only four

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or five combatants is, at present, the typical pattern. The greater number of Soviet naval vessels in the area are unarmed auxiliaries, oceanographic research, and space-support ships -- of questionable value for "showing the flag" or gunboat diplomacy.

Soviet Purposes

6. Thus, Soviet naval activities in the Indian Ocean serve a number of military or quasi-military purposes. They support space operations. They are concerned with intelligence gathering. The oceanographic operations undoubtedly are connected with efforts to improve Soviet ASW techniques. By giving crews operational experience in previously unfamiliar waters, they assist the Soviet navy in its efforts to extend its range and, in general, to develop further its blue-water capability. They prepare the way, against the day when the Suez Canal is reopened, for the establishment of a convenient transit route between the USSR's eastern and western Fleet operating areas. And, finally, Soviet naval units are a potential safeguard for the USSR's civil maritime operations in the area.

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7. But operations in the Indian Ocean are, at the same time, part of a large pattern which is not specifically military in conception. This pattern encompasses an array of operations outside the traditional operating sphere of the Soviet navy. In this sense the Indian Ocean presence does for the USSR some of the same things as its presence in the Mediterranean and in the Caribbean. Broadly speaking, it supports the USSR's image of itself as a super-power. This image has caused it to seek something like equality with the US across the whole spectrum of international power. This has meant, among other things, that Moscow has set out to establish a naval presence which is international in scope. Moscow probably envisages a future, not too distant, when the Soviet navy will be able to move about in all of the oceans and seas of the world.

8. Events of recent years have undoubtedly hastened the maturing of this ambition. The Soviet-American confrontation over Cuba and US intervention in Vietnam revealed that the US, by virtue of its superiority in applicable conventional military means, had options not available to the USSR. The Arab-Israeli war in 1967 found the Russians without a credible

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capacity for military intervention to put onto the scales and, thereby, in a weakened diplomatic position. And these experiences apart, the Soviets became convinced that their competition with the West and China for influence in the Third World at large would be more effective if it had some military backing.

9. There is, of course, a considerable potential for turbulence at many points along the long littoral of the Indian Ocean and its contiguous waterways, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. It is not difficult to conceive of circumstances arising in which the Russians would consider a show of force to be politically expedient and risk-free. They showed off the coast of Ghana in 1969 that they do not disdain the practice of gunboat diplomacy. In certain corners of the Indian Ocean even a handful of naval units might represent a credible intervention force. Such thoughts have probably occurred to the Russians. But such contingencies are unforeseeable. For now, the Russians evidently expect their political profits to derive simply from their increased visibility. This show-the-flag policy seems intended to accomplish several aims: to make clients and potential clients aware of the USSR's might; to demonstrate that the USSR has political

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interests in the area; and, to warn its antagonists -- in this case both the Western powers and the Chinese -- that it does not lack military means to support its interests on the spot.

10. This instrument of influence supplements but does not displace other instruments. Moscow will undoubtedly continue efforts to expand its diplomatic and trade relations throughout the area. It will not be surprising if the Russians repeat the signal given by Brezhnev last year that they are prepared to assist in the organization of a collective security system for Asia. Genuine or not such a proposal, together with other Soviet efforts, may seem to Moscow a useful way of reminding the nations of the area that the USSR is a power to be reckoned with and of getting them to begin to think of friendship with the USSR as an alternative to Chinese domination or alignment with the West. The all but total withdrawal of British military power from East of Suez and uncertainty about the future role of the US have, indeed, already given this line of thought some appeal.

11. Even now, for instance, the notion that the advent of the Russians may not represent a threat but might, instead, be desirable as a counterweight to the Chinese (and, some would

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say, the Japanese as well) finds some favor in Southeast Asia. It is not entirely rejected even in Australia, though there the more prevalent attitude is one of concern about the growing Soviet presence. To some of the non-Communist governments of the region the Russians have come, in fact, to seem almost like an anti-revolutionary force by contrast with the Chinese.

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12. The limited presence represented by current Soviet deployments is, however, one thing. It might be quite another if the Russians were thought to be trying to establish military domination of the area. There would be considerable

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alarm in Australia which would look to the US for counterreaction. It would probably revive expiring concern about Soviet intentions among the Southeast Asian states. Such a development would surely not be welcomed in South Asia, either by Pakistan or India. The latter, for all its relations with the USSR to assuage its fears of China, does not face a Chinese naval threat. If it had its way there would be no naval forces, Western or Soviet in the Indian Ocean. It has refused.

13. In the western reaches of the Indian Ocean, the political objectives to which the Soviet naval presence lends some support lack a single focus. The show of the Soviet flag in East Africa may give the Russians some added measure of prestige relative to the West, and the Chinese. But it is yet to be shown that the political impact is significant. The USSR's interest in the Red Sea area seems to be more a function of its Middle East policy than of Indian Ocean policy. It is not clear what kind of position the Soviets hope to stake out in the Persian Gulf. Tempting as it might be to them, any thought of their going for control over Gulf oil is likely to be seen as impractical for some time to come. Simply a bid for

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major influence in the area would probably be sufficient to provoke a strong reaction among the Western powers and in Iran with whom Moscow seems to have a serious interest in cultivating better relations. But, if only because of the uncertain political future of the area and the possibility that unforeseen opportunities will appear, Moscow will not let its now established right to a presence there lapse. In all of these areas, Soviet naval operations have, of course, been greatly hampered by the closure of the Suez Canal. The Russians might be able to reduce this handicap by obtaining shore facilities at, for instance, Aden, or at Hodeida in Yemen or Berbera in Somalia, where the Russians have helped with the construction of deep-water ports. There is no evidence, however, that they have applied for such facilities.

Further Development of the Soviet Presence

14. It is quite evident that the Russians are not wholly satisfied with their present naval capability in the Indian Ocean. Their attempts to obtain port facilities for their naval vessels in India and Singapore means that they want at least to ease some of the operational problems they now face. It might mean that they are looking ahead to the enlargement

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of their force. Some enlargement seems entirely possible. But how far and how fast they are likely to want to go in this direction is open to question. It may be that deployment into the area, once begun, will acquire a momentum of its own. The reopening of Suez, by greatly facilitating the movement of Soviet vessels into and across the Indian Ocean, would be sure to bring some increase in Soviet naval operations there, perhaps a substantial increase. (This would, in turn, make the acquisition of shore facilities on the coasts of the Red Sea and East Africa or at Aden all the more desirable from a military point of view.) The future course of events in the area itself might cause Moscow to expand its involvement -- as it did in the Mediterranean.

15. But there is no evident reason why, until or unless some or all of these things happen, a force not greatly larger than the present one should not suit Moscow's political purposes. Despite the growth of its interest in the area and the trend toward expansion of its presence, it clearly has more vital concerns closer to them, in Europe and on the Sino-Soviet frontier and in the Mediterranean, which will no doubt continue to have a higher claim on the USSR's economic and

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and military resources. It does not need to undertake a substantially larger deployment in order to keep pace with its competitors given the negligible Western naval presence and the non-existent Chinese one. And, it is not easy to imagine events developing there, as the Arab-Israeli conflict caused them to develop in the Middle East, in such a way as to draw the USSR into considerably deeper involvement.

16. Despite political trends in the area generally favorable to their objectives, resistance to the expansion of their military presence, on the part of some of the littoral states as well as of the Western powers, is not likely to evaporate completely. To the extent that difficulty in obtaining shore facilities obliges them to depend mainly on at-sea support of their vessels, the expansion and improvement of their operational capabilities will be impeded. Some concern for the hazards of reliance on the hospitality of local states and a residual regard for their anti-imperialist image may, in any case, incline the Russians to keep the use of shore facilities to a minimum.

17. The Soviets would probably increase their ASW operations in the Indian Ocean if it became, or they suspected

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it was about to become, an area of regular deployment of US missile submarines. But there is no good reason, otherwise, to expect a precipitate increase in Soviet military interest in the area. It can be doubted that Moscow thinks of its present force as the nucleus of some future force endowed with a militarily significant offensive capability. It would only make sense for the Russians to establish such a force if they thought it could play an effective role in a conflict between conventional forces in conditions of general war. But, the Russians are not likely to regard this as an advantageous theater of major engagement because of the severe problems of support and reinforcement which they could expect to face in time of war. These would be owing to the fact that control of key points on the sea routes from Soviet home bases to the area -- the Skagerak, the Turkish Straits, Gibraltar, the Cape of Good Hope, the South China Sea and the Indonesian straits -- is now, and is likely to remain, in unfriendly or potentially unfriendly hands.

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